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C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 000143

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/29/2018

TAGS: PREL PHUM KIRF CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: CHRISTIAN GROUPS CONCERNED OVER POSSIBLE PASSAGE OF ANTI-CONVERSION BILL

REF: A. COLOMBO 115

¶B. COLOMBO 032

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: On January 20 and February 2, separate evangelical Christian groups met Ambassador to discuss their concerns regarding the likely passage of "anti-conversion legislation." The legislation's vague language and harsh punishments would infringe on their rights of thought, conscience and religion, the groups maintained. In a concession to its Buddhist, Sinhala chauvinist coalition partner, the JHU, the government has allowed the legislation to go forward as a "private bill" and stated that party members should vote their conscience, hoping to insulate the President and the government from direct responsibility for its passage. The evangelical groups reported they had received little support from moderate religious leaders, including the Catholic church and mainstream Protestant denominations. They also said the media had been instructed to minimize press coverage of the Bill. Ambassador recounted the various steps he has taken to raise USG concerns about the bill with senior members of the GSL, including President Rajapaksa. End Summary.

Evangelical Christian Groups Deeply Concerned Over Anti-Conversion Bill

¶12. (C) On February 2 Ambassador met with representatives from the National Christian Fellowship of Sri Lanka, (NCFSL, a consortium of evangelical Christian groups) to hear their concerns over the imminent passage of the "Prohibition of Forcible Religious Conversions Bill" in Parliament this month. The meeting followed a separate meeting on January 20 with the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) that raised identical concerns about the likely enactment of the legislation. Both groups explained that the Bill, now in its third and final reading, was overly vague and would be used to infringe upon their rights of thought, conscience and religion. Both NCFSL and NCEASL pointed out that the legislation's prohibition on "allurement" could hinder their communities charitable activities, or even something as mundane as an invitation to their homes for a meal. Furthermore, NCEASL pointed out that the punishments listed in the bill (up to 7 years imprisonment and a fine of close to \$5000) are overly harsh. (Note: In comparison, punishment for rioting armed with a deadly weapon is 3 years

imprisonment and/or a fine). Furthermore, census data indicate that the Christian population has declined over the past two decades to now just under 7% of the population with just 1% reporting they are evangelical. (ote: copies of the bill and the NCEASL brief against it were e-mailed to the desk and DRL on January 20.)

A Vote of Conscience on a Private Bill

¶3. (SBU) The Government, in an attempt to placate its Buddhist nationalist coalition partner JHU, has allowed the bill to pass through the required three readings as a "private bill" and has indicated it will allow its party's members to vote their conscience. Indications from both supporters and opponents of the bill indicate it is likely to pass under such circumstance. Long a pet project of the JHU, the xenophobic, Sinhalese supremacist party intends to use the passage of the legislation to bolster its support during an expected general election this summer. If the bill were delayed and the Parliament dissolved the JHU would be forced to resubmit it and re-start the tedious and lengthy process of three required readings in a new Parliament.

Little Help From Catholics And Other Moderate Religious Leaders

¶4. (C) Both NCFSL and NCEASL reported that they have received little support from moderate Buddhist leaders, or more significantly, other members of the Christian community in Sri Lanka. NCFSL alleged that members of the Catholic church as well as mainstream Protestant faiths have been reassured by senior members of government that it is the evangelical community, not Catholics or other Christian denominations, that will be targeted after the bill is passed.

Media Told to Ignore Bill

¶5. (C) During the February 2 meeting, NCFSL member and working journalist Nayomini Weerasooriya reported that her colleagues at Sirasa TV had been informally instructed not to cover the bill in their news reports. Weerasooriya also pointed out the minimal media coverage of a prayer rally held on January 26 to demonstrate against the bill that drew about 4000 participants. Weerasooriya reported that the Criminal Investigative Division (CID) of the Police had visited NCFSL's offices shortly after the rally in an attempt to intimidate the organization and its members.

Ambassador Repeatedly Presses GSL to Drop the Bill

¶6. (C) In the fall of 2008 Ambassador communicated USG concern about the bill to Secretary of the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights Rajiva Wijesinha, stating that the Bill violated Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief - all conventions to which Sri Lanka is a signatory. On January 9, during a meeting with President Rajapaksa (Ref B), Ambassador stated his concern that extreme elements within the Sinhalese Buddhist community were dominating public discourse, as exemplified by the anti-conversion legislation. Ambassador urged the President to protect the multi-ethnic, multi-faith nature that had defined Sri Lanka for decades, despite the 25 year ethnic conflict. Following the January 20 NCEASL meeting, Ambassador again wrote the President, noting the heightened interest and concern the Bill was receiving on Capitol Hill, within the new Administration and among the international community at large, and urged Presidential Secretary Lalith Weeratunga to prevent the Bill's adoption by having the government come out against its passage. A copy of the letter was sent to Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona as well.

In the Bill's place, Ambassador suggested an inter-religious committee that could study how people of all faiths could exercise their right to worship freely without infringing on the rights of others.

¶7. (SBU) During the February 2 meeting Ambassador empathized with the NCFSL members present and expressed our continuing concern about the legislation. Ambassador suggested a heightened effort to work with other moderate religious leaders to see the Bill defeated and undertook to write the Anglican Bishop of Colombo to encourage him to help defeat the legislation. The Bishop responded, that "Today, issues connected with the Bill are so politicised that many, including moderate Buddhists and Hindus, are of the view that the idea of such a Council as an option to legislation, is too late. Consequently the only remote possibility of a Council being considered at this stage will depend on an initiative from either the President or the Mahanayakes." (Note: The four Mahanayakes are senior Buddhist clergy members representing the four different Buddhist sects in the country.) Ambassador also spoke with the Vatican Ambassador in Colombo, Monsignor Mario Zenari, on February 3. Zenari relayed that during a early December meeting in Rome the Pope had brought up the legislation with President Rajapaksa, who had expressed his opposition to the Bill. Ambassador communicated to the Vatican Representative that frankly this was not good enough and that without the President's opposition the Bill would pass. Ambassador urged the Monsignor to have the Vatican communicate their opposition to the Bill directly to senior members of the GSL.

¶7. (C) COMMENT AND ACTION REQUEST: The Bill represents one front in a widening offensive by the more extreme elements of the President's coalition to push an aggressive Buddhist nationalist agenda on the heels of government victories against the LTTE in the North. We believe it is likely that unless the government comes out explicitly against the bill, it will pass later this month when it is scheduled for a vote. Post will continue to press the government directly and engage moderate religious leaders (Ref A) to encourage them to oppose these more extreme elements within the Sri Lankan polity. Post suggests that Embassy Vatican be given instructions to urge the Vatican to have the Pope or another senior member of the Vatican speak directly with President Rajapaksa or another senior member of the GSL to communicate the Vatican's opposition to the Bill, and note the need for the President's personal intervention, without which the bill is likely to pass.

Blake